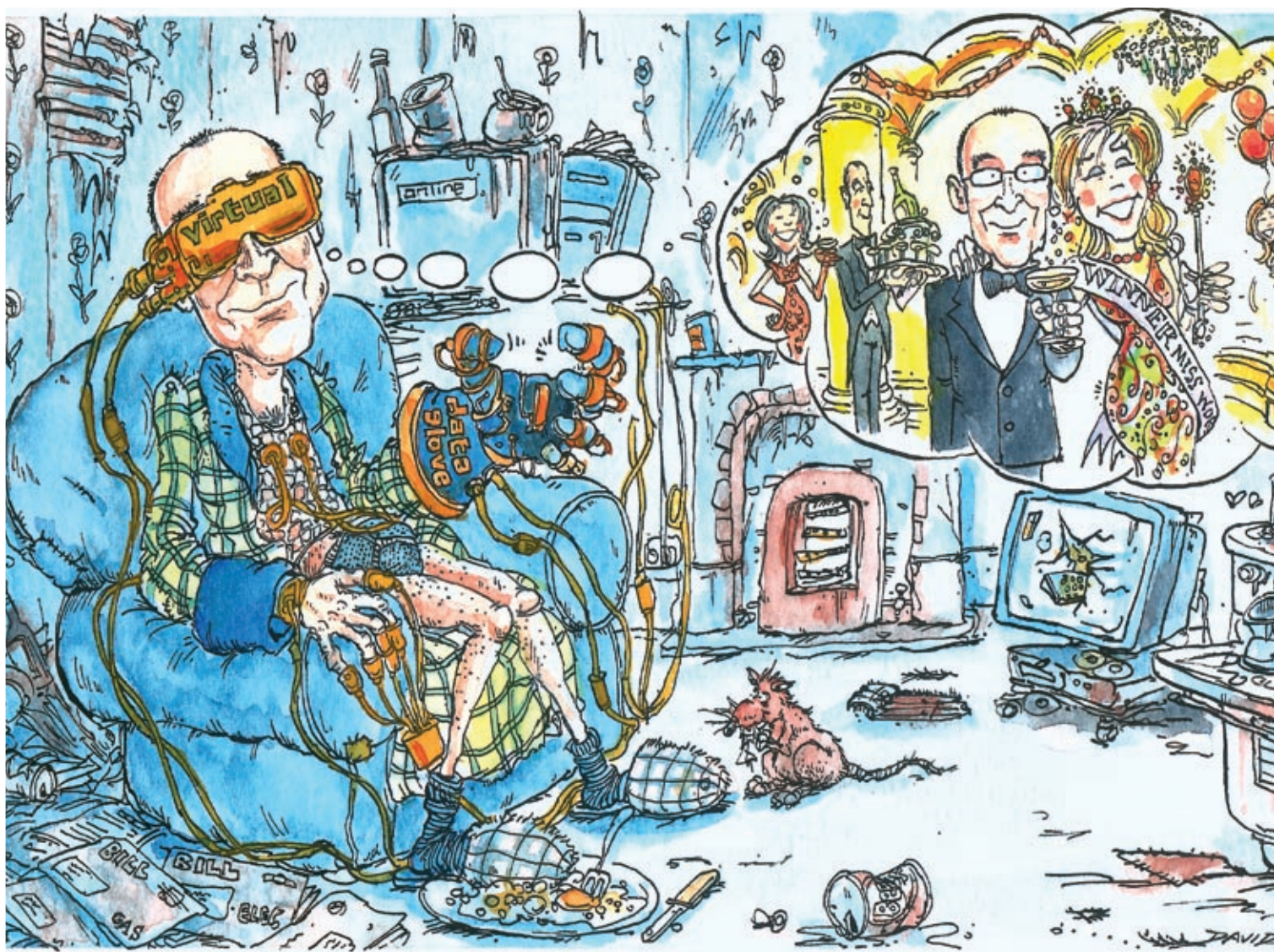




RANTS & RAVES

Simon Edwards reveals a fantasy world consisting of a luxury car, leather upholstery, Miss World – and a punch in the face. Mel Croucher, meanwhile, is not averse to a backhand himself

VIRTUALLY USELESS



SIMON EDWARDS RANTS

Christmas. The crunch of gravel as the luxury cars pull up outside Edwards Towers; laughter from the throngs of well-wrapped merry-makers as they eagerly glide through the snow to the front door, where the staff are waiting with trays of mulled wine. And the glowing candlelight of the dining room, reflecting warmly from the crystal and silverware set upon a groaning table laden with the finest

foods and decorated with traditional greenery. How wonderful. Dream on.

This is a fantasy. I will only ever experience a Christmas like this should virtual reality ever happen like it appears in sci-fi films and *Red Dwarf*. When this happens I, along with millions of others, will spend my remaining days in my underpants, festering on a commode, my sensory organs obscured by bits of computer equipment and my real life in tatters. To paraphrase a well-known American leader, bring it on.

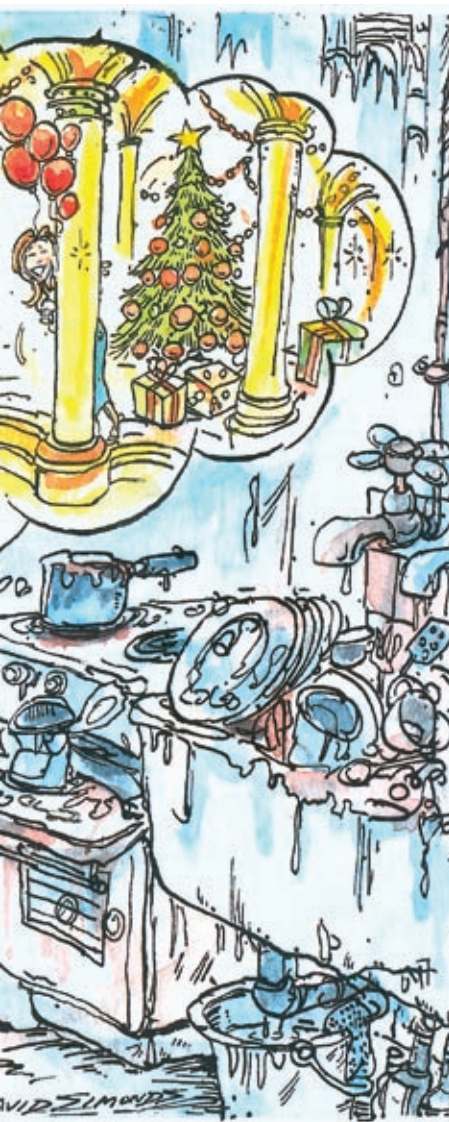
We are not there yet, however. Today's virtual reality games are

not very realistic, at least not graphically. Neither are they great at stimulating users' senses. If you want to truly immerse yourself in a computer simulation, you'll want to be able to taste food and drink, smell the leather of the upholstery in your new sports car and, most importantly, touch things and people. And have them touch you. For a truly realistic virtual existence you should be able to feel a punch to the face as realistically as anything more intimate. As yet, commercially available virtual reality games do not include anything like this level of realism.

GET A (SECOND) LIFE

Despite the obvious shortfalls in today's virtual realities, people are signing up in droves for a very poor approximation of real life. Second Life is an online 'world' populated by digital versions of nearly one-and-a-half million real people. These users sign in and control a character, which they can move around in a 3D landscape. They can talk to each other, buy and sell things and even create their own virtual businesses. You can spend real money to buy pretend money and use that to buy pretend land on which to build pretend property. You can rent space in a virtual shopping centre, earning pretend money that you can convert back to real cash.

So popular is this virtual reality that proper businesses have set up shop inside it. Reuters has even created an in-game news service that reports on events. Remember, these are not real events. They are pretend. That said, the US government is looking at the virtual economy that runs inside such



services with a view to taxing it in a very non-pretend way. If you fail to pay, you'll be visited by some pretty realistic cops, I'd imagine.

Now let's just pause for a minute and ask ourselves what we want from a virtual reality. While we do this, remember that you are going to spend real time using it – time that could otherwise be spent with the family, walking through the countryside, visiting museums, reading books, playing sports and having a physical relationship with someone who doesn't come in 65,536 shades of pixels.

CHORE BORE

If I am going to embrace virtual reality, then it had better be good. I don't want to have to take time out from visiting the best virtual nightclub around with Miss World and her runners-up just to do my virtual tax return. I don't want to worry about the mortgage on my virtual mansion, or doing the virtual washing up after my virtual Christmas party. One of my pretend guests spilled digital red

wine on my expensive pretend sofa. I hope my virtual contents insurance has an accidental damage clause.

VIRTUAL INANITY

There is an alternative approach. We increasingly use computers to fulfil everyday tasks, so maybe a virtual reality interface will make mundane chores more fun and possibly easier. You could appear to walk into your online bank rather than use a web browser. Guiding your virtual character down the aisle of a 3D Tesco simulation would be a more natural way to shop online than using a supermarket website. At the very least, the queue at the deli counter should be short.

Currently, many software companies offer online technical support using real-time chat facilities on their websites. For me, though, using such systems has rarely been helpful and the faceless entities lurking on the other side of my screen are marginally less use than a virtual chocolate cheese plane. I really hope that the next step in virtual reality will allow you to come face to face with these remote technicians. They won't be any more useful, but you might be able to punch them.

FANCY A BUNG?



**MEL CROUCHER
RAVES**

This month, I am going to exploit my position as the Godfather of High-Tech Abuse by shamelessly plugging a book that promotes computerised gambling.

The reason I am acting like this is because I was bribed 50 quid to do so by the author of the book. Furthermore, I am going to try and bribe you, too. I am perfectly happy to take a bung but, unlike football managers and party politicians, I admit everything and will not be accused of humbuggery. Here's how it happened.

I was in a café in Primrose Hill, tucking in to sausage, bacon and eggs, when Paul McCartney walked in. A friendly woman sitting at an adjacent table murmured to me, "I bet you he'll be offended if he sees what you're eating". So I slowly wiped the dead animal grease from my chops, and replied, "Yeah? How much?" It was the start of a brief but intense business relationship. With the friendly woman, that is, not the ex-Beatle. Sir Paul had a nice chat with her, but he completely ignored me and my meat.

After he had left, I established that the friendly woman was involved in global internet betting, and so I smugly told her that I was planning a magazine article about the collapse of online gaming, because the US Federal Government had criminalised the use of the internet to place and settle bets.

I went on to give my opinion that the only winner in a horse race was the bookie. She sighed, leaned towards me, tapped me on the nose with a froth-flecked coffee spoon and said, "You know, I used to bet on the horses. And then I discovered that every afternoon at 2.30 sharp they run a two-horse race in America. You can bet to win, or you can bet to lose. You don't have to put your money on before the race begins. In fact, you can wait until one side is well ahead and then make up your mind. Oh, and you can claim your winnings any time you happen to be ahead. I can't remember the last time I backed a horse."

The name of her fanciful race? She called it the Dow Jones Stakes, and other people call it 'spread betting', which is perfectly legal in the UK, but banned in the US. She said she had turned her computer into a cash machine and, what's more, she had written a book about it. Then she offered me the bung.

QUIDS IN

The deal was that if I bought her book for a tenner, she would arrange for £50 to be deposited into an account with my name on it. I did, and she did. The book is called *Bets And The City* and the woman's name is Sally Nicoll. And because it is the season of goodwill and gift-giving, I am going to pass on her bung of fifty quid to every reader of these words. Google her, go to her website and contact her, mentioning my name. Really, I kid you not. There's 50 quid waiting for you.

Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas everyone? You can bet on it!

BUG'S LIFE



**SIMON EDWARDS
RANTS**

Remember the millennium bug? This was an amusing situation that developed after computer programmers neglected to notice that, at some time in the future, the two last digits in a year (90, 91, 92 and so on) would stop counting up and start from zero again.

In the late 1990s, people started to panic, fearing that planes would fall from the sky, banks

would melt down and nuclear power stations would fail in a variety of disastrous and spectacular ways.

Those silly programmers. Or where they? The cynical among us might guess that these short-sighted fools were nothing of the sort, and that their use of a double digit to signify a year date was simply a way of ensuring some future lucrative consultancy fees. Fees that would be forthcoming when everyone realised that ancient but essential programs would break and that there were few people around who could still program using the old computer languages.

Seven years on, and we are still recovering from the complete lack of drama that occurred when the clock rolled over on 1st January 2000 and we reached the so-called noughties. Seven years on, and you would have thought that our lesson was well learned. We got away with it, so let's not risk any further problems. Let programmers not forget that there are 24 hours in a day, 12 months in a year and (usually) 365 days in a year. You don't have to work for NASA to understand that every year, just after midnight on 31st December, a new year starts.

SPACE CADETS

In fact, it turns out that working for NASA is no guarantee that you will remember this basic fact. In November, the space organisation realised that it had a problem because it had forgotten this last small point. It wanted to launch the next Shuttle mission before the New Year but, unless the space ship took off for its 12-day mission before 18th December, things could go wobbly.

What do you think will happen on board when 1st January 2007 arrives? At the very least, you would imagine that the clock in the ship's computer would change from 31st December 2006 to 1st January 2007. But this is not the case. The ship's computer will think that it is day 366 of 2006. This shouldn't bring the life support systems down, but it could mean that ground control loses contact with the Shuttle for a while.

Of course, the end of a millennium doesn't happen very often (once every thousand years, for any NASA programmers who happen to be reading). However, a year tends to end much more frequently. Taking this into account when programming the Shuttle computer must surely be cheaper than preparing the rescue mission that NASA has scheduled, just in case. ☹